

Exploring Factors that Contribute to Keeping Children Safe at Home: A Model for Preventing Child Apprehensions

By Jamie Pfau, PhD



SSHRC CRSH

1 Background

MANITOBA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM STATS:

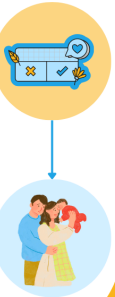
- One of the highest rates of children in care in the world
- Four times the Canadian average
- 90% of children in care are Indigenous
- Devolution in 2006 created four new authorities:



- The Northern Authority
 - The Métis Authority
 - The Southern Authority
 - The General Authority
- 3 authorities are dedicated to providing culturally appropriate care. Indigenous scholars believe devolution has not been successful in responding to the needs of Indigenous families.
- The data collected in this study is from the General Authority

RESEARCH GAPS ADDRESSED:

- Existing child welfare research focuses on risk, deficits, and individual family pathology
- Limited research on how organizational practices and decision-making frameworks shape apprehension outcomes
- Currently, there is a lack of empirical, practice-based research examining how some agencies achieve sustained reductions in child apprehensions without compromising safety
- Indigenous overrepresentation is well documented; however, limited relational, strengths-based and community-informed approaches have been seriously examined as legitimate alternatives to the traditional power-over approach
- The perspective of front-line child welfare professionals implementing preventative, family-preserving practices remain unexplored

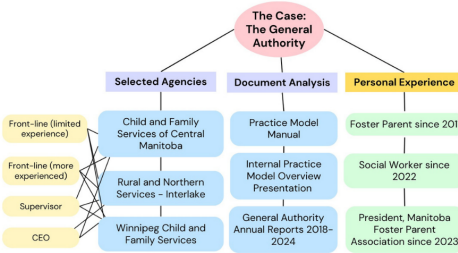


2 Research Aims

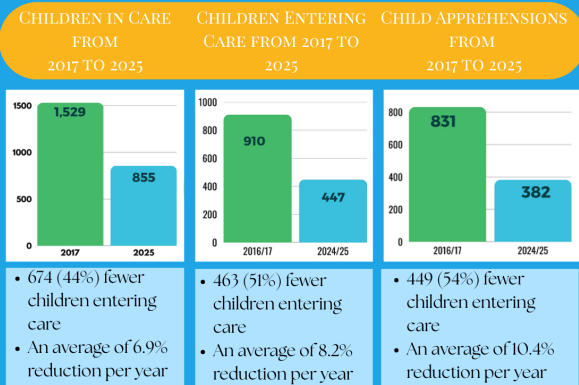
- Understand how front-line practitioners navigate risk and relational decision making;
- Identify organizational conditions that support prevention-focused, family-preserving responses; and
- Develop a systems-informed conceptual model to guide culturally safe, prevention-driven child welfare practices (see below)

3 Methods

Qualitative Embedded Single Case Study Design



FROM 2017 TO 2025, THE GENERAL AUTHORITY HAS CONSISTENTLY REDUCED THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CARE



Of the children who came into care between 2016 and 2023:

- 66% have been reunified
- 50% were reunified within six months
- 72% were reunified within one year
- 93% were reunified within two years

4 Results

Theme 1: Reasons children are apprehended

- Domestic violence & coercive control = imminent danger; safety planning is sometimes not possible
- Substance use & family capacity (removal tied to safety/unstable caregiving, often alongside mental health + lack of supports)

Theme 2: Internal practices preventing apprehension

- Family networking (kin/community safety nets; trust-building)
- Safe and Together Model (domestic violence reframed; partner with non-offending caregiver; perpetrator accountability; shift in language/practice)
- Increased tolerance for risk (safety plan, consult, manage risk vs. removal)
- Practice change & learning (mentorship; reflective case consultation; vulnerability and trust to ask questions)
- Training/tools (e.g., Structured Decision Making; consistency + confidence)

Theme 3: External practices preventing apprehension

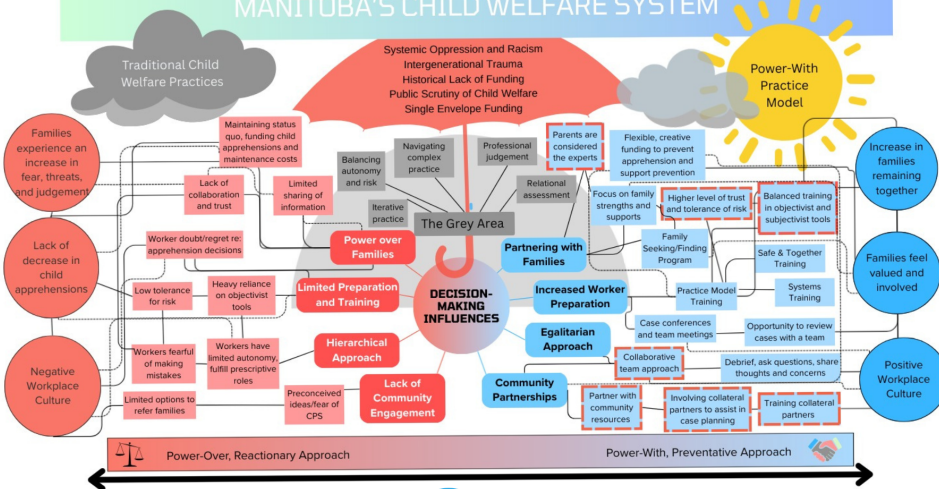
- Community partnerships (wraparound supports; culturally responsive options; prevention resources like respite homes for birth families)
- Policy/legislation & funding shifts (single envelope/block funding enabling prevention; Indigenous jurisdiction reforms)

Theme 4: Challenges shaping decisions

- Systemic/structural constraints (actuarial tools can feel punitive)
- Emotional/professional toll (fear-based climate; high-stakes uncertainty)
- Resource limitations (waitlists; rural gaps; workers filling service shortages)
- Navigating evolving frameworks (expectations for creativity/risk tolerance)
- Preconceived notions of CFS (belief that apprehension is the solution)

Conceptual Model

MANITOBA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



5 Conclusions

CHILD SAFETY DOES NOT REQUIRE REMOVAL WHEN SYSTEMS SUPPORT RELATIONAL, PREVENTION-FOCUSED PRACTICE

This study demonstrates that child apprehensions can be significantly reduced without compromising safety when agencies prioritize family networking, collaborative safety planning, increased tolerance for managed risk, and culturally responsive supports, instead of removing children

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND SYSTEM DESIGN MATTER AS MUCH AS INDIVIDUAL WORKER DECISIONS.

Reductions in apprehensions were enabled by supportive organizational climates, practice models (e.g., Safe & Together), flexible funding structures, and leadership that legitimized professional judgment and shared decision making, highlighting that prevention is a systems-level outcome, not an individual one

RISK-BASED, POWER-OVER APPROACHES REPRODUCE HARM, WHILE POWER-WITH MODELS CREATE SAFER AND MORE EQUITABLE OUTCOMES.

The conceptual model shows how shifting from surveillance and compliance toward relational, strengths-based, and family-led approaches disrupts colonial child welfare practices and supports family unity, while also identifying key tension points where systemic constraints still limit transformation